

Roy Meachum



War story

One year ago news stories spoke of lead elements of the 82nd Airborne arriving in Saudi Arabia.

Earlier this summer I met a pair of those "elements": muscular young men, barely out of their teens, splashing about a motel swimming pool and keeping an eye out for girls.

The pair had landed in the desert kingdom last August and stayed until mid-April. One was a medic, the other worked communications gear.

Names were not exchanged. We enjoyed the anonymity shared by Chaucer's pilgrims. I identified myself as a journalist who had formerly lived in the Middle East. Combat was not discussed.

The medic expressed sympathy for the Iraqis he had treated. He displayed no animosity toward them as enemies. He had admiration for the Saudis he had met after the shooting stopped. The radio man agreed, while pointing out his unit had spent virtually all those months "out in the boonies" — some isolated spot completely surrounded by sand.

It is important to understand this was a conversation among temporary friends. My questions generally responded to matters they brought up. I made no attempt to prod the young men into areas that might have made them uncomfortable. My wife was off shopping. I wanted the company.

I did ask what they thought about the Arabs. The medic told about a Saudi who had invited his work crew back to his home. Their host had graduated from a U.S. university. They talked about Islam.

"He tried to convert me," the young trooper insisted, mentioning a Koran given as a gift. "I told him straight out I was a Southern Baptist and I believed in the Bible."

The medic admitted leafing through Islam's holy book. "They've got the stories all wrong," he said, but then allowed as how there were things he admired about Islam. "Like what?" I asked.

"Their legal system," he said. "Saudi Arabia has no crime. We committed all the crimes while we were out there." No comment from me seemed called for.

The Desert Storm veteran con-

tinued: "Two guys from our division were caught raping locals. They cut off their heads. Their families probably received letters that said, 'Billy Bob fell off the back of a moving deuce-and-a-half.'"

I did not ask him how he learned of his comrades' executions. I assumed their fate had been circulated by commanding officers, warning other soldiers. As a medic, my new friend may have handled the bodies when they were shipped back to this country.

The way the beheadings were related left no doubt in my mind,

especially since the youthful Southern Baptist felt the rapists had received exactly what they deserved.

It is difficult to describe my reaction. I was not particularly surprised; on the other hand, my senses were jolted. Given time to absorb the story, I may have returned to the executions in an oblique fashion, seeking further verification. But the conversation was abruptly terminated when an awaited young lady appeared. My paratrooper friends departed with handshakes and "Good meeting you, sir."

Sitting alone, my thoughts turned to an incident during Reagan's attempt to intervene in Lebanon.

In the weeks leading up to the suicide truck bombing that killed 248 Americans, a Marine position was threatened by an Israeli tank headed straight in. At the last minute, a U.S. lieutenant saved his men by scrambling aboard the rolling vehicle and holding his cocked .45 to the tank commander's head.

I have never forgiven the Israeli government for pulling out of the high ground overlooking the Beirut airport without informing the Marine commander until after the fact. The information lag denied the U.S. forces the opportunity to secure their perimeter from which the suicide bomber drove.

No, I do not blame former Israeli Prime Minister Begin for the American deaths. My greater anger was reserved for my own govern-

ment's failure to demand full Israeli cooperation and coordination, particularly after the tank incident.

In order to get American troops into the desert, did the White House yield jurisdiction over crimes committed against civilians to Saudi justice? Hearing the paratrooper's story, I wondered what further price George Bush paid to have his fling at military glory.

I understand full well why news of the probable executions was not released to the media. Strong law-and-order enthusiasts would have probably cheered, echoing the 82nd's medic. Many Americans, even those who support capital punishment, might be repulsed at the prospect of their countrymen, however guilty, being forced to submit to an alien legal system that includes beheadings.

The complete facts about the recent war may be years surfacing, thanks in no small part to the tight censorship imposed by the Bush White House. History teaches such delay is always more damaging to democracy than immediate full disclosure. Will politicians ever learn?

A journalist's overriding responsibility is to the truth, as he believes the truth to exist. I believe the Desert Storm veteran.